

Maratissa – Fifty Images of Reflections of Jewish Life and Kabbalah on Our Munich in Us



By Shomit Sirohi

Now one reads a lot,
and talks a lot and even
knows a lot, but then
Indian jokes and
perspectives covered by
Jewish people, Zionists
but also others and
Ilaan – what can this
mean – so many views,
and such the same
conversation – as if in

fact the car, the train
and the office with Ilaan
getting off at Mumbai
then is then all that is
tracked through the
shades, or in film
footage. I mean a
number of cascading
scenes on that one day.
A single day then of a
modernist
Bildungsroman which
then is about just a few
days more. I mean also
in fact just the process
of so many things

becoming then a jive as well and music and resonances.

I. Opening to Infinity

At one point, now I mean the point. Make a note of this. I also mean at one point, which commences a narrative. But not narrative, a small short story, perhaps but also a

political jotting. Perhaps then this meant too much. It was already covered in Israel in 1921, and then again in 1958, and then recently in the 2020s. I mean this long set of arcs then, as I also mean Kabbalah. In a number of small running, news reels. This is then film reels. I cover inventions, I also mean in fact a whole running business. I call it shortages. I

mean food riots in Palestine. Isiah meant this is history, and cover it well. I was wearing a jacket and walking in Tel Aviv, and in fact in rubble they said. This then is tragic. I mean tragedy. But Israel will win.

II. Self-cancelling Expressions – Limitless

And so I mean limitless.
I mean like a naïve man
covering a number of
works, paragraphs,
sentences and writings.
A lot of things here
were based on the
process of arcs. I meant
then to be also
interested in a cuento. I
mean Borges admires
this process of reading
into the dates, three
points as it were in
Jewish history, 1921,

1958 and then recently,
2020s. I mean then to
study this as three arcs,
two long periods and
third. I also mean then
to draw this out as it
were. I mean cover the
person as a policeman.

III. Breathless and at Heights

I meant then at the
height of love, I
descended off the

staircase and met her in her house opposite my house in Tel Aviv. I was all about her. Many women then in this process, which is about music. I composed a Werkmeister tune, I meant it was her we were listening to, but I who had another plan of symphony. Keep singing it, it works. It goes like hmm, hmm, hmm hmm hmm. And then tunes into a rhythm. Hmm

hmm hmm, in keen
senses and then Christ.
I mean in fact cover this
over again. I mean
overlay the two like a
tape recorder. And
that's the rest, keep
doing it. It's raining and
the girls are swinging.

IV. Lacking Evidence

This then is
Werkmeister again. We
are humming it I hope.
And so a process of
dialectical praxis now I
am covering. A few
people and dis-grouped
into four or five people
on the street. It means
we are strangers to
each other. I am in fact
humming the
Werkmeister, and it
means also overlays, a
steep keen line. I am
just in fact now walking

into the café and
drinking some rum.

Part II

I. Surrealist Techniques on Werkmeister and Activities

In fact then play the
tune, and keep dancing
and jiving and twisting

and so develop a process. Imagine that a shot is made of cinema of in fact a surrealist gesture of Isiah and others, Isikiel walking in Tel Aviv and talking at a coffee shop. They are happy. They are intellectual and covering this process of women and talking in musical dances. It means we are won. It also means in fact to record the music and

daily existence. Now in fact the music has a line and elipses on it, and is resonating and joining many splits, Messiah.

II. Footage

Now in fact I am walking in a jacket to the working class and in fact seeing the praxis disperse into a large arrow. In a small arc

then all of this was
history.

Part III

A Fine Balance, many
people were in a boat in
1921. A Fine Balance A
Fine Balance. 1

Prologue: 1975 A Fine
Balance. The morning
express train and car
was then speeding on a

road in a passing by
which was so surrealist.
We mean all drinking
water and rum in the
morning and carrying
some papers, bloated
with passengers slowed
to a crawl, then lurched
forward suddenly, as
though to resume full
speed. The car was the
one thing. In praxis I
also cover then in fact
offices, whose brief
deception jolted its
workers. The bulge of

humans hanging out of the doorway distended perilously, like a soap bubble at its limit.

Inside the compartment, Maneck Kohlah held on to the overhead railing, propped up securely within the crush. He felt someone's elbow knock his textbooks from his hand. I mean to cover this as an angle – from the train Isiah and all laughing. Perspectives in literature. Can we

think of literary things.
Like a train, a car and
an office and
perspectives of people
running on the road.
And Isikiel is laughing.
Zoran and even
Immanuel, Stephan are
talking on the cell
phone to Sirohi in voice.
In the seats nearby, a
thin young fellow was
catapulted into the arms
of the man opposite
him. Maneck's
textbooks fell upon

them. “Ow!” said the young fellow, as volume one slammed into his back. Laughing, he and his uncle untangled themselves. Ishvar Darji, who had a disfigured left cheek, helped his nephew out of his lap and back onto the seat. “Everything all right, Mane?” “Apart from the dent in my back, everything is all right,” said Ronprakash Darji, picking up the

two books covered in brown paper. He hefted them in his slender hands and looked around to find who had dropped them. Maneck acknowledged ownership. The thought of his heavy textbooks thumping that frail spine made him shudder. He remembered the sparrow he had killed with a stone, years ago; afterwards, it had made

him sick. His apology was frantic. “Very sorry, the books slipped and —” “Not to worry,” said Ishvar. “Wasn’t your fault.” To his nephew he added, “Good thing it didn’t happen in reverse, hahn? If I fell in your lap, my weight would crack your bones.”

Part IV

Running in on one day.
Perhaps many days. The
same Jewish Zionists
and Ilan. I mean this is
structure – and
narrative. I also mean
cover this as repeating
like above sentences
with the women also
joking and laughing and
being surrealist. All of
this like a car, a train
and in fact an office.
Perspectives, We mean
that.

They laughed again,
Maneck too, to
supplement his apology.
Ishvar Darji was not a
stout man; it was the
contrast with
Omprakash's skinny
limbs that gave rise to
their little jokes about
his size. The wise-cracks
originated sometimes
with one and sometimes
the other. When they
had their evening meal,
Ishvar would be sure to
spoon out a larger

portion onto his
nephew's enamel plate;
at a roadside dhaba, he
would wait till

Omprakash went for
water, or to the latrine,
then swiftly scoop some
of his own food onto the
other leaf. If Omprakash
protested, Ishvar would
say, "What will they A
Fine Balance 3 think in
our village when we
return? That I starved
my nephew in the city
and ate all the food

myself? Eat, eat! Only way to save my honour is by fattening you!”

“Don’t worry,”

Omprakash would tease back. “If your honour weighs even half as much as you, that will be ample.” Omprakash’s physique, however, defied his uncle’s efforts and stayed matchstick thin. Their fortunes, too, stubbornly retained a lean and hungry aspect, and a triumphal return

to the village remained a distant dream. The southbound express slowed again. With a pneumatic hiss, the bogies clanked to a halt. The train was between stations. Its air brakes continued to exhale wheezily for a few moments before dying out. Omprakash looked through the window to determine where they had stopped. Rough shacks stood beyond the

railroad fence,
alongside a ditch
running with raw
sewage. Children were
playing a game with
sticks and stones. An
excited puppy danced
around them, trying to
join in. Nearby, a
shirtless man was
milking a cow. They
could have been
anywhere. The acrid
smell of a dung-fire
drifted towards the
train. Just ahead, a

crowd had gathered near the level-crossing. A few men jumped off the train and began walking down the tracks. "Hope we reach in time," said Omprakash. "If someone gets there before us, we're finished for sure." Maneck Kohlah asked if they had far to go. Ishvar named the station. "Oh, that's the same one I want," said

Maneck, fingering his sparse moustache. Hoping to spot a watch dial, Ishvar looked up into a thicket of wrists growing ceilingward. "Time, please?" he asked someone over his shoulder. The man shot his cuff stylishly and revealed his watch: a quarter to nine. "Come on, yaar, move!" said Omprakash, slapping the seat between his thighs. "Not as obedient

as the bullocks in our village, is it?" said his uncle, and Maneck laughed. Ishvar added it was true—ever since he was a child, their village had never lost a bullock-cart race when there were competitions on festival days. A Fine Balance 4 "Give the train a dose of opium and it will run like the bullocks," said Omprakash. A combseller, twanging

the plastic teeth of a large comb, pushed his way through the crowded compartment. People grumbled and snarled at him, resenting the bothersome presence. “Oi!” said Omprakash to get his attention. “Plastic hairband, unbreakable, plastic hairclip, flower shape, butterfly shape, colourful comb, unbreakable.” The

combseller recited in a half-hearted monotone, uncertain whether this was a real customer or just a joker passing the time. “Big comb and small comb, pink, orange, maroon, green, blue, yellow comb—unbreakable.”

Omprakash gave them a test run through his hair before selecting a red specimen, pocket-sized. He dug into his trousers and extracted a coin.

The combseller suffered hostile elbows and shoulders while searching for change. He used his shirtsleeve to wipe hair oil off the rejected combs, then returned them to his satchel, keeping in his hand the big dual-toothed one to resume his soft twanging through the compartment. “What happened to the yellow comb you had?” asked

Ishvar. “Broke in two.”
“How?” “It was in my
back pocket. I sat on it.”
“That’s the wrong place
for a comb. It’s meant
for your head, Om, not
your bottom.” He
always called his
nephew Om, using
Omprakash only when
he was upset with him.
“If it was your bottom,
the comb would have
smashed into a hundred
pieces,” returned his
nephew, and Ishvar

laughed. His disfigured left cheek was no hindrance, standing firm like a mooring around which his smiles could safely ripple. He chucked Omprakash under the chin. Most of the time their ages—forty-six and seventeen—were a misleading indicator of their actual relationship. “Smile, Om. Your angry mouth does not suit your hero hairstyle.” He winked at

Maneck to include him in the fun. “With a puff like that, lots of girls will be after you. But don’t worry, Om, I’ll select a nice wife for you. A woman big and strong, with flesh enough for two.”

Part V

A Fine Balance. Ilaan meets Borges and Belano for a short while

in Buenos Aires. Now
get this joke.

Omprakash grinned and administered a flourish to his hair with the new comb. The train still showed no sign of moving. The men who had wandered outside came back with news that yet another body had been found by the tracks, near the level-crossing. Maneck edged towards the door to listen.

A Fine Balance - and then just watch me run and compared it. His nephew was right, there it was: Dina Dalal, followed by the address. Omprakash regarded Maneck with sudden hostility. "Why are you going to Dina Dalal? Are you a tailor?" "Me, tailor? No, she is my mother's friend." Ishvar tapped his nephew's shoulder. "See, simply you were panicking.

Come on, let's find the building." Maneck did not understand what they meant, till Ishvar explained outside the station. And so in fact get that fucking gun and get it now. I meant Ilaan is laughing in his room in Mumbai. "You see, Om and I are tailors. Dina Dalal has work for two tailors. We are going to apply."

"And you thought I was running there to steal

your job.” Maneck smiled. “Don’t worry, I am just a student. Dina Dalal and my mother used to be in school together. She’s letting me stay with her for a few months, that’s all.” They asked a paanwalla for directions, and walked down the street that was pointed out. Omprakash was still a little suspicious. “If you are staying with her for a few months, where is

your trunk, your belongings? Only two books you have?”

“Today I’m just going to meet her. I will shift my things from the college hostel next month.”

They passed a beggar slumped upon a small wooden platform fitted with castors, which raised him four inches off the ground. His fingers and thumbs were missing, and his legs were amputated

almost to the buttocks.
“O babu, ek paisa day-ray!” he sang, shaking a tin can between his bandaged palms. “O babu! Hai babu! Aray babu, ek paisa day-ray!”
“That’s one of the worst I’ve seen since coming to the city,” said Ishvar, and the others agreed. Omprakash paused to drop a coin in the tin. They crossed the road, asking again for directions. “I’ve been

living in this city for two months,” said Maneck, “but it’s so huge and confusing. I can recognize only some big streets. The little lanes all look the same.” “We have been here six months and still have the same problem. In the beginning we were completely lost. The first time, we couldn’t even get on a train—two or three went by before we learned how to

push.” A Fine Balance 7
Maneck said he hated it
here, and could not wait
to return to his home in
the mountains, next
year, when he finished
college.

Part VI

In a long run on the joke
and then in fact all this
talking to Werkmeister –
get my point it is just a
thrilling run of the joke.

But I also mean narrative. Ilaan is getting off buses and locals and trains in Mumbai is the joke.

“We have also come for a short time only,” said Ishvar. “To earn some money, then go back to our village. What is the use of such a big city? Noise and crowds, no place to live, water scarce, garbage everywhere. Terrible.”

“Our village is far from here,” said Omprakash. “Takes a whole day by train—morning till night—to reach it.” “And reach it, we will,” said Ishvar. “Nothing is as fine as one’s native place.” “My home is in the north,” said Maneck. “Takes a day and night, plus another day, to get there. From the window of our house you can see snow-covered mountain

peaks.” “A river runs near our village,” said Ishvar. “You can see it shining, and hear it sing. It’s a beautiful place.” They walked quietly for a while, occupied with home thoughts. Omprakash broke the silence by pointing out a watermelon-sherbet stand. “Wouldn’t that be nice, on such a hot day.” And so in fact I mean Ilaan is busy smoking

and chatting with the Saamna guys. The vendor stirred his ladle in the tub, tinkling chunks of ice afloat in a sea of dark red. "Let's have some," said Maneck. "It looks delicious." "Not for us," said Ishvar quickly. "We had a big breakfast this morning," and Omprakash erased the longing from his face. "Okay," said Maneck doubtfully, ordering one

large glass. He studied the tailors who stood with eyes averted, not looking at the tempting tub or his frosted glass. He saw their tired faces, how poor their clothes were, the worn-out chappals. He drank half and said, "I'm full. You want it?" They shook their heads. "It will go to waste." "Okay, year, in that case," said Omprakash, and took the sherbet. He gulped

some, then passed it to his uncle. Ishvar drained the glass and returned it to the vendor. "That was so tasty," he said, beaming with pleasure. "It was very kind of you to share it with us, we really enjoyed it, thank you." His nephew gave him a disapproving look to tone it down. A Fine Balance 8 How much gratitude for a little sherbet, thought

Maneck, how starved
they seemed for
ordinary kindness.

Now we mean
perspectives. Don't get
it? I mean in fact
Omprakash is one
perspective, Manek
which is like Munich we
meant is another
perspective. And then
cars and trains, and
even jokes is another
perspective. Now key all
of this to Wermeister

the music, a run of notes on a staff which is joining and disjoining and keying in to this.

Now read the fucking signals.

THE VERANDAH DOOR had a brass nameplate: Mr. & Mrs. Rustom K. Dalal, the letters enriched by years of verdigris. Dina Dalal

answered their ring and accepted the scrap of crumpled paper, recognizing her own handwriting. “You are tailors?” “Hahnji,” said Ishvar, nodding vigorously. All three entered the verandah at her invitation and stood awkwardly. The verandah, which used to be an open gallery, had been converted into an extra room when Dina Dalal’s late husband

was still a child—his parents had decided it would be a playroom to supplement the tiny flat. The portico was bricked and fitted with an iron-grilled window. “But I need only two tailors,” said Dina Dalal. “Excuse me, I’m not a tailor. My name is Maneck Kohlah.” He stepped forward from behind Ishvar and Omprakash. “Oh, you are Maneck! Welcome! Sorry, I

couldn't recognize you. It's been years since I last saw your mummy, and you I have never, ever seen." She left the tailors on the verandah and took him inside, into the front room.

"Can you wait here for a few minutes while I deal with those two?"

"Sure." Maneck took in the shabby furnishings around him: the battered sofa, two chairs with fraying

seats, a scratched
teapoy, a dining table
with a cracked and
faded rexine tablecloth.
She mustn't live here,
he decided, this was
probably a family
business, a boarding
house. The walls were
badly in need of paint.
He played with the
discoloured plaster
blotches, the way he did
with clouds, imagining
animals and landscapes.
Dog shaking hands.

Hawk diving sharply.
Man with walking-stick
climbing mountain. On
the verandah, Dina
Dalal ran a hand over
her black hair, as yet
un-invaded by grey, and
turned her attention to
the tailors. A Fine
Balance 9 At forty-two,
her forehead was still
smooth, and sixteen
years spent fending for
herself had not
hardened the looks
which, a long time ago,

used to make her brother's friends vie to impress her. She asked for names and tailoring experience. The tailors claimed to know everything about women's clothes. "We can even take measurements straight from the customer's body and make any fashion you like," said Ishvar confidently, doing all the talking while Omprakash nodded

away. “For this job, there will be no customers to measure,” she explained. “The sewing will be straight from paper patterns. Each week you have to make two dozen, three dozen, whatever the company wants, in the same style.” “Child’s play,” said Ishvar. “But we’ll do it.” “What about you?” she addressed Omprakash, whose look was

disdainful. "You have not said a word." "My nephew speaks only when he disagrees," said Ishvar. "His silence is a good sign." She liked Ishvar's face, the type that put people at ease and encouraged conversation. But there was the other tight-lipped fellow, who frightened away the words. His chin was too small for his features, though when he smiled

everything seemed in proportion. She stated the terms of employment: they would have to bring their own sewing-machines; all sewing would be piecework. "The more dresses you make, the more you earn," she said, and Ishvar agreed that that was fair. Rates would be fixed according to the complexity of each pattern. The hours were

from eight a.m. to six p.m.—less than that would not do, though they were welcome to work longer. And there would be no smoking or paan-chewing on the job. “Paan we don’t chew only,” said Ishvar. “But sometimes we like to smoke a beedi.” “You will have to smoke it outside.” The conditions were acceptable. “What is the address of your shop?” asked Ishvar.

“Where do we bring the sewing-machines?” A Fine Balance 10 “Right here. When you come next week, I will show you where to put them, in the back room.”

“Okayji, thank you, we will definitely come on Monday.” They waved to Maneck as they left.

“We will see you again soon, hanh.” “Sure,” said Maneck, waving back. Noticing Dina Dalal’s silent inquiry, he

explained about their meeting on the train. “You must be careful who you talk to,” she said. “Never know what kind of crooks you might run into. This is not your little hamlet in the mountains.” “They seemed very nice.” “Hmm, yes,” she said, reserving judgement. Then she apologized again for assuming he was a tailor. “I could not see you properly

because you were standing behind them, my eyes are weak.” How silly of me, she thought, mistaking this lovely boy for a bowlegged tailor. And so sturdy too. Must be the famous mountain air they talk about, the healthy food and water. She peered a little closer, tilting her head to one side. “It has been over twenty years, but I can recognize your mummy in your face.

You know Aban and I were in school together.” “Yes,” he said, uncomfortable under her intense scrutiny. “Mummy told me in her letter. She also wanted to let you know I’ll move in from next month, and she’ll mail you the rent cheque.” “Yes, yes, that’s all right,” she said, dismissing his concern about the details and drifting

again into the past.

“Real little terrors we used to be in our school-days. And a third girl, Zenobia. When we three were together, it was trouble with a capital t, the teachers would say.” The memory brought a wistful smile to her face. “Anyway, let me show you my house, and your room.” “You live here as well?” “Where else?” As she led him through the dingy little

flat, she asked what he was taking at college. "Refrigeration and air-conditioning." "I hope you will do something about this hot weather then, make my home more comfortable." He smiled feebly, saddened by the place in which she resided. Not much better than the college hostel, he thought. And yet, he A Fine Balance 11 was looking forward to it. Anything would do,

after what had happened there. He shuddered and tried to think of something else. “This one will be your room.” “It’s very nice. Thank you, Mrs. Dalal.” There was a cupboard in one corner with a scratched, misshapen suitcase on top. A small desk stood beside the cupboard. Here, as in the front room, the ceiling was dark and flaking, the walls

discoloured, missing chunks of plaster in several places. Other stark patches, recently cemented, stood out like freshly healed wounds. Two single beds lay at right angles along the walls. He wondered if she would sleep in the same room. "I will move one bed into the other room for myself." He looked through the door beyond and glimpsed a room tinier and in

worse condition,
crowded by a cupboard
(also with a suitcase on
top), a rickety table, two
chairs, and three
rusting trunks stacked
on a trestle. "I am
turning you out of your
own room," mumbled
Maneck, the
surroundings
depressing him rapidly.
"Don't be silly." Her
tone was brisk. "I
wanted a paying guest,
and it is my great good

luck to get a nice Parsi boy—the son of my schoolfriend.” “It’s very kind of you, Mrs. Dalal.” “And that’s another thing. You must call me Dina Aunty.” Maneck nodded. “You can bring your things here any time. If you are not happy with the hostel, this room is ready—we don’t have to wait for a special date next month.” “No, it’s all right, but thank you,

Mrs.—” “Ahn, careful.”
“I mean, Dina Aunty.”
They smiled. WHEN
MANECK left her flat,
she began pacing the
room, suddenly restless,
as though about to
embark on a long
voyage. No need A Fine
Balance 12 now to visit
her brother and beg for
next month’s rent. She
took a deep breath.
Once again, her fragile
independence was
preserved. Tomorrow

she would bring home
the first batch of sewing
from Au Revoir Exports.
A Fine Balance 13 City
by the Sea I A Fine
Balance 14 Dina Dalal
seldom indulged in
looking back at her life
with regret or
bitterness, or
questioning why things
had turned out the way
they had, cheating her
of the bright future
everyone had predicted
for her when she was in

school, when her name was still Dina Shroff. And if she did sink into one of these rare moods, she quickly swam out of it. What was the point of repeating the story over and over and over, she asked herself—it always ended the same way; whichever corridor she took, she wound up in the same room. Dina's father had been a doctor, a GP with a

modest practice who followed the Hippocratic oath somewhat more passionately than others of his profession. During the early years of Dr. Shroff's career, his devotion to his work was diagnosed, by peers, family members, and senior physicians, as typical of youthful zeal and vigour. "How refreshing, this enthusiasm of the

young,” they smiled,
nodding sagely,
confident that time
would douse the fires of
idealism with a healthy
dose of cynicism and
family responsibilities.
But marriage, and the
arrival of a son,
followed eleven years
later by a daughter,
changed nothing for Dr.
Shroff. Time only
sharpened the
imbalance between his
fervour to ease suffering

and his desire to earn a comfortable income.

“How disappointing,” said friends and relatives, shaking their heads. “Such high hopes we had for him. And he keeps slaving like a clerk, like a fanatic, refusing to enjoy life. Poor Mrs. Shroff. Never a vacation, never a party—no fun at all in her existence.” At fifty-one, when most GPS would

have begun considering options like working half-time, hiring an inexpensive junior, or even selling the practice in favour of early retirement, Dr. Shroff had neither the bank balance nor the temperament to permit such indulgences. Instead, he volunteered to lead a campaign of medical graduates bound for districts in the interior. There,

where typhoid and cholera, unchallenged by science or technology, were still reaping their routine harvest of villagers, Dr. Shroff would try to seize the deadly sickles or, at the very least, to blunt them. But Mrs. Shroff undertook a different sort of campaign: to dissuade her husband from going into what she felt were the jaws A
Fine Balance 15 of

certain death. She attempted to coach Dina with words to sway her father. After all, Dina, at twelve, was Daddy's darling. Mrs. Shroff knew that her son, Nusswan, could be of no help in this enterprise. Enlisting him would have ruined any chance of changing her husband's mind. The turning point in the father-and-son relationship had come

seven years ago, on Nusswan's sixteenth birthday. Uncles and aunts had been invited to dinner, and someone said, "Well, Nusswan, you will soon be studying to become a doctor, just like your father." "I don't want to be a doctor," Nusswan answered. "I'll be going into business—import and export." Some of the uncles and aunts nodded approvingly.

Others recoiled in mock horror, turning to Dr. Shroff. "Is this true? No father-son partnership?" "Of course it's true," he said. "My children are free to do whatever they please." But five-year-old Dina had seen the hurt on her father's face before he could hide it. She ran to him and clambered onto his lap.

Finale

You get this Daddy stuff,
that Sainik
motherfucker. Ilaan gets
off in Tel Aviv.

“Daddy, I want to be a
doctor, just like you,
when I grow up.”
Everyone laughed and
applauded, and said,
Smart little girl, knows
how to get what she
wants. Later, they
whispered that the son
was obviously not made
of the same solid stuff

as the father—no ambition, wouldn't amount to much. Dina had repeated her wish in the years to come, continuing to regard her father as some kind of god who gave people good health, who struggled against illness, and who, sometimes, succeeded in temporarily thwarting death. And Dr. Shroff was delighted with his bright child. On parents'

night at the convent school, the principal and teachers always had the highest praise for her. She would succeed if she wanted to, Dr. Shroff knew it for certain. Mrs. Shroff also knew, for certain, that her daughter was the one to recruit in the campaign against Dr. Shroff's foolish philanthropic plan of working in remote, Godforsaken villages.

But Dina refused to cooperate; she did not approve of devious means to keep her beloved father home. A Fine Balance 16 Then Mrs. Shroff resorted to other methods, using not money or his personal safety or his family to persuade him, for she knew these would fail hopelessly. Instead, she invoked his patients, claiming he was abandoning them,

old and frail and helpless. “What will they do if you go so far away? They trust you and rely on you. How can you be so cruel? You have no idea how much you mean to them.”

“No, that is not the point,” said Dr. Shroff. He was familiar with the anfractuous arguments that her love for him could prompt her to wield. Patiently he explained there were

GPS galore in the city who could take care of the assorted aches and pains—where he was going, the people had no one. He comforted her that it was only a temporary assignment, hugging and kissing her much more than was usual for him. “I promise to be back soon,” he said. “Before you even grow used to my absence.” But Dr. Shroff could not keep

his promise. Three weeks into the medical campaign he was dead, not from typhoid or cholera, but from a cobra's bite, far from the lifesaving reach of antivenins. Mrs. Shroff received the news calmly. People said it was because she was a doctor's wife, more familiar with death than other mortals. They reasoned that Dr. Shroff must have often carried

such tidings to her regarding his own patients, thus preparing her for the inevitable. When she took brisk charge of the funeral arrangements, managing everything with superb efficiency, people wondered if there was not something a little abnormal about her behaviour. Between disbursing funds from her handbag for the

various expenses, she accepted condolences, comforted grieving relatives, tended the oil lamp at the head of Dr. Shroff's bed, washed and ironed her white sari, and made sure there was a supply of incense and sandalwood in the house. She personally instructed the cook about the special vegetarian meal for the next day. After the full four days of

death ceremonies, Dina was still crying. Mrs. Shroff, who was busy tallying the prayer-bungalow charges from the Towers of Silence, said briskly, "Come, my daughter, be sensible now. Daddy would not like this." So Dina did her best to control herself. A Fine Balance
17 Then Mrs. Shroff continued absentmindedly, writing out the cheque. "You

could have stopped him if you wanted. He would have listened to you," she said. Dina's sobs burst out with renewed intensity. In addition to the grief for her father, her tears now included anger towards her mother, even hatred. It would take her a few months to understand that there was no malice or accusation contained in what had been said, just a sad

and simple statement of fact as seen by her mother. Six months after Dr. Shroff's death, after being the pillar that everyone could lean on, Mrs. Shroff gradually began to crumble. Retreating from daily life, she took very little interest in the running of her household or in her own person. It made little difference to Nusswan, who was twenty-three

and busy planning his own future. But Dina, at twelve, could have done with a parent for a few more years. She missed her father dreadfully.

Her mother's withdrawal made it much worse. NUSSWAN SHROFF had earned his own living as a businessman for two years prior to his father's death. He was still single, living at home, saving his money

while searching for a suitable flat and a suitable wife. With his father's passing and his mother's reclusion, he realized that the pursuit of a flat was unnecessary, and a wife, urgent. He now assumed the role of head of the family, and legal guardian to Dina. All their relatives agreed this was as it should be. They praised his selfless decision,

admitting they had been wrong about his capabilities. He also took over the family finances, promising that his mother and sister would want for nothing; he would look after them out of his own salary. But, even as he spoke, he knew there was no need for this. The money from the sale of Dr. Shroff's dispensary was sufficient. Nusswan's

first decision as head of the family was to cut back on the hired help. The cook, who came for half the day and prepared the two main meals, was kept on; Lily, the live-in servant, A Fine Balance 18 was let go. “We cannot continue in the same luxury as before,” he declared. “I just can’t afford the wages.” Mrs. Shroff expressed some doubt about the change. “Who

will do the cleaning? My hands and feet don't work like before."

"Don't worry, Mamma, we will all share it. You can do easy things, like dusting the furniture.

We can wash our own cups and saucers, surely. And Dina is a young girl, full of energy. It will be good for her, teach her how to look after a home."

"Yes, maybe you are right," said Mrs. Shroff,

vaguely convinced of the need for money-saving measures. But Dina knew there was more to it. The week before, while passing the kitchen on her way to the wc well past midnight, she had noticed her brother with the ayah: Lily sitting on one end of the kitchen table, her feet resting on the edge; Nusswan, his pyjamas around his ankles, stood between

Lily's thighs, clasping her hips to him. Dina watched his bare buttocks with sleepy curiosity, then crept back to bed without using the toilet, her cheeks flushed. But she must have lingered a moment too long, for Nusswan had seen her. Not a word was spoken about it. Lily departed (with a modest bonus, unbeknownst to Mrs. Shroff), tearfully

declaring that she would never find as nice a family to work for ever again. Dina felt sorry for her, and also despised her. Then the new household arrangement got under way.

Everyone made an honest effort. The experiment in self-reliance seemed like fun. "It's a little like going camping," said Mrs. Shroff. "That's the spirit," said Nusswan.

With the passing of days, Dina's chores began to increase. As a token of his participation, Nusswan continued to wash his cup, saucer, and breakfast plate before going to work. Beyond that, he did nothing. One morning, after swallowing his last gulp of tea, he said, "I'm very late today, Dina. Please wash my things." "I'm not your servant! Wash

your own dirty plates!”
Weeks of pent-up
resentment came
gushing. “You said we
would each do our own
work! All your stinking
things you leave for
me!” “Listen to the little
tigress,” said Nusswan,
amused. A Fine Balance
19 “You mustn’t speak
like that to your big
brother,” chided Mrs.
Shroff gently.
“Remember, we must
share and share alike.”

“He’s cheating! He doesn’t do any work! I do everything!”

Nusswan hugged his mother: “Bye-bye, Mamma,” and gave Dina a friendly pat on the shoulder to make up. She shrank from him.

“The tigress is still angry,” he said and left for the office. Mrs. Shroff tried to soothe Dina, promising to discuss it later with Nusswan, maybe

convince him to hire a part-time ayah, but her resolve melted within hours. Matters continued as before. As weeks went by, instead of restoring fairness in the household, she began turning into one of the chores on her daughter's ever-growing list. Now Mrs. Shroff had to be told what to do. When food was placed before her, she ate it, though it did her

little good, for she kept losing weight. She had to be reminded to bathe and change her clothes. If toothpaste was squeezed out and handed to her on the brush, she brushed her teeth. For Dina, the most unpleasant task was helping her mother wash her hair—it fell out in clumps on the bathroom floor, and more followed when she combed it for her. Once

every month, Mrs. Shroff attended her husband's prayers at the fire-temple. She said it gave her great comfort to hear the elderly Dustoor Framji's soothing tones supplicating for her husband's soul. Dina missed school to accompany her mother, worried about her wandering off somewhere. Before commencing the

ceremony, Dustoor Framji unctuously shook Mrs. Shroff's hand and gave Dina a prolonged hug of the sort he reserved for girls and young women. His reputation for squeezing and fondling had earned him the title of Dustoor Daab-Chaab, along with the hostility of his colleagues, who resented not so much his actions but his lack of subtlety, his refusal to

disguise his embraces
with fatherly or spiritual
concern. They feared
that one day he would
go too far, drool over his
victim or something,
and disgrace the fire-
temple. Dina squirmed
in his grasp as he patted
her head, rubbed her
neck, stroked her back
and pressed himself
against her. He had a
very short beard,
stubble that resembled
flakes of grated

coconut, A Fine Balance
20 and it scraped her
cheeks and forehead.
He released her just
when she had
summoned enough
courage to tear her
trapped body from his
arms. After the fire-
temple, for the rest of
the day at home Dina
tried to make her
mother talk, asking her
advice about housework
or recipes, and when
that failed, about Daddy,

and the days of their newlywed lives. Faced with her mother's dreamy silences, Dina felt helpless. Soon, her concern for her mother was tempered by the instinct of youth which held her back—she would surely receive her portion of grief and sorrow in due course, there was no need to take on the burden prematurely. And Mrs. Shroff spoke in

monosyllables or sighs,
staring into Dina's face
for answers. As for
dusting the furniture,
she could never proceed
beyond wiping the
picture frame
containing her
husband's graduation
photograph. She spent
most of her time gazing
out the window.

Nusswan preferred to
regard his mother's
disintegration as a
widow's appropriate

renunciation, wherein she was sloughing off the dross of life to concentrate on spiritual matters. He focused his attention on the raising of Dina. The thought of the enormous responsibility resting on his shoulders worried him ceaselessly. He had always perceived his father to be a strict disciplinarian; he had stood in awe of him, had even been a little

frightened of him. If he was to fill his father's shoes, he would have to induce the same fear in other, he decided, and prayed regularly for courage and guidance in his task. He confided to the relatives—the uncles and aunts—that Dina's defiance, her stubbornness, was driving him crazy, and only the Almighty's help gave him the strength to go forward in his duty.

His sincerity touched them. They promised to pray for him too. “Don’t worry, Nusswan, everything will be all right. We will light a lamp at the fire-temple.” Heartened by their support, Nusswan began taking Dina with him to the fire-temple once a week. There, he thrust a stick of sandalwood in her hand and whispered fiercely in her ear, “Now pray

properly—ask Dadaji to make you a good girl, ask Him to make you obedient.” A Fine Balance 21 While she bowed before the sanctum, he travelled along the outer wall hung with pictures of various dustoors and high priests. He glided from display to display, stroking the garlands, hugging the frames, kissing the glass, and ending with the very tall

picture of Zarathustra to which he glued his lips for a full minute. Then, from the vessel of ashes placed in the sanctum's doorway, he smeared a pinch on his forehead, another bit across the throat, and undid his top two shirt buttons to rub a fistful over his chest. Like talcum powder, thought Dina, watching from the corner of her eye, from her bowed position,

straining to keep from laughing. She did not raise her head till he had finished his antics.

“Did you pray properly?” he demanded when they were outside. She nodded. “Good. Now all the bad thoughts will leave your head, you will feel peace and quiet in your heart.”

Rehearsals

“Look, go in and dry yourself, I’ll buy two hot coffees for us.” When she still A Fine Balance 37 hesitated, he threatened to take off his shirt and towel her head with it in the lobby. Laughing, she accepted the handkerchief and returned to the ladies’ room. The regulars sighed happily. Inside,

Dina rubbed her hair with the handkerchief. It had a nice smell to it, she thought. Not perfume, but a clean human smell. His smell. The same one she perceived sometimes while sitting next to him. She put it against her nose and breathed deeply, then folded it away, embarrassed. It was still raining lightly when the concert ended. They walked to

the bus stop. The drizzle hissed in the trees, as though the leaves were sizzling. Dina shivered. “Are you cold?” “Just a little.” “Hope you’re not getting a fever. All that soaking. Listen, why don’t you put on my raincoat, and I’ll take your umbrella.” “Don’t be silly, it’s broken. Anyway, how can you ride your cycle with an umbrella?” “Of course I can. I can ride it

standing on my head if necessary.” He insisted, and in the bus shelter they undertook the exchange. He helped her into the Duckback raincoat and his hand grazed her shoulder. His fingers felt warm to her cold skin. The sleeves were a bit long, otherwise it fit quite well. And nicely heated up by his body, she realized, as it slowly got the chill out of her. They

stood close together,
watching the fine
needles of rain slanting
in the light of the
streetlamp. Then they
held hands for the first
time, and it seemed the
most natural thing to
do. It was hard to let go
when the bus came.
From now on, Rustom
used his bicycle only to
get to and from work. In
the evenings he came
by bus, so they could
travel together and he

could see her home.
Dina was happier
meeting him without the
bicycle. She felt he
should give it up
altogether, it was too
dangerous in the city
traffic. A Fine Balance
38 I'm going to get
married," announced
Dina at the dinner table.
"Ah," beamed her
brother. "Good, good.
Which one is it, Solly or
Porus?"—these two
being the gents he had

most recently introduced. Dina shook her head. "Then it must be either Dara or Firdosh," said Ruby, smiling meaningfully.

"They are both crazy about you." "His name is Rustom Dalal."

Nusswan was surprised; the name did not belong among the numerous candidates he had brought before Dina over the past three years. Perhaps it was

someone she had met at one of the family gatherings he so detested. "And where did we come across him?" "We didn't. I did." Nusswan did not like the answer. He was offended that all his efforts, all his choices, were being spurned by her for a total stranger. "Just like that you want to marry this fellow? What do you know about him and his

family? What does he know about you, your family?" "Everything," said Dina in a tone that made him anxious. "I've been seeing Rustom for a year and a half now." "I see. A well-kept secret," he said, affecting sarcasm. "And what does he do, this Dalal fellow, your Rustom-in-hiding?" "He's a pharmaceutical chemist." "Hah! Pharmaceutical

chemist! A bloody compounder! Why don't you use the proper word? That's what he is, mixing prescription powders all day long behind a counter." He reminded himself there was no sense in losing his temper just yet. "So, when are we going to meet this Father Forty-Lakhs of yours?" "Why? So you can insult him in person?" "I have no reason to insult him.

But it is my duty to meet him, and then advise you properly. In the end it's up to you."

On the appointed day, Rustom arrived with a box of sweetmeats for Nusswan and Ruby, which he placed in the hands of little Xerxes, who was almost three now. For Dina, he brought a new A Fine Balance 39 umbrella.

The significance was not lost on her, and she

smiled. He winked at her when the others were not looking. "It's gorgeous," she said, opening it up. "What a lovely pagoda shape." The fabric was sea green, and the shaft was stainless steel, with a formidable spike at the end. "That's a dangerous weapon," joked Nusswan. "Be careful who you point it at." They had tea, with cheese sandwiches and

butter biscuits prepared by Ruby and Dina, and the time passed without unpleasantness. But that night, after the visitor left, Nusswan said he could not understand for one moment what was in his sister's head—brains or sawdust. "Selecting someone without looks, without money, without prospects. Some fiancés give diamond rings. Others a gold watch, or

at least a little broach.
What does your fellow
bring? A bloody
umbrella! To think I
wasted so much time
and energy introducing
you to solicitors,
chartered accountants,
police superintendents,
civil engineers. All from
respectable families.
How will I hold my head
up when people hear
that my sister married
an unambitious
medicine-mixing fool?

Don't expect me to rejoice or come to the wedding. For me it will be a day of deep, dark mourning." It was sad, he lamented, that in order to hurt him she was ruining her own life. "Mark my words, your spite will come back to haunt you. I am powerless to stop you, you are twenty-one, no longer a little girl I can look after. And if you are determined to throw

your life away in the gutter, I can only watch helplessly while you do it.” Dina had expected all this. The words washed over her and gurgled into oblivion, leaving her untouched. The way the rain had rolled off Rustom’s lovely raincoat, she remembered, on that beautiful night. But she wondered again, as she had so many times, where her brother had

learned to rave so
proficiently. Neither
their mother nor father
had had much talent for
it. In a few days
Nusswan grew calmer.
If Dina was getting
married and leaving for
good, better that it
should happen amicably,
without too much fuss.
Secretly he was also
pleased that Rustom A
Fine Balance 40 Dalal
was no great catch. It
would have been

unbearable if his friends had been rejected in favour of someone superior. He participated in the wedding plans with more enthusiasm and generosity than Dina expected. He wanted to book a hall for the reception and pay for everything out of the money he had been collecting for her. “We’ll have the wedding after sunset, and then dinner.

We'll show them how it's done—everyone will envy you. A four-piece band, floral decorations, lights. I can afford about three hundred guests. But no liquor—too expensive and too risky. Prohibition police are everywhere, you bribe one and ten more show up for their share.” That night in bed, Ruby, who was pregnant with their second child, expressed dismay at Nusswan’s

extravagance. “It’s up to Rustom Dalal to spend, if they want to get married. Not your responsibility—especially when she wouldn’t even let you select the husband. She never appreciates anything you do for her.” Rustom and Dina, however, had simpler preferences. The wedding took place in the morning. At Dina’s request, it was a quiet

ceremony in the same fire-temple where her parents' prayers were performed on each death anniversary.

Dustoor Framji, old and stoop-shouldered, watched from the shadows, upset that he had not been asked to conduct the marriage rites. Time was slowing him down, and the flesh of young women was rarely caught now in his once-dexterous

embraces. But the name of Dustoor Daab-Chaab clung to his autumnal years even as all else was withering. “It’s disgraceful,” he grumbled to a colleague. “Especially after my long association with the Shroff family. For death, they come to me—for saros-nu-paatru, for afargan, baaj, faroksy. But for a happy occasion, for wedding

ashirvaad, I am not wanted. It's a matter of shamefulfulness." In the evening there was a party at the Shroff residence. Nusswan insisted on at least this much celebration, and arranged for a caterer. There were forty-eight guests, of which six were Rustom's friends, plus his Shirin Aunty and Darab Uncle. The rest were from Nusswan's circle,

including extended-family members who could not be left out without risking criticism from *A Fine Balance* 41 relatives—the insinuating, whispered kind of criticism to which he was so sensitive. The dining room, drawing room, Nusswan's study, and the four bedrooms were rearranged to allow mingling and movement, with tables

set up for food and drink. Little Xerxes and his friends ran from room to room in a frenzy of adventure and discovery, screaming and laughing. They were thrilled by the sudden freedom they enjoyed in a house where their previous visits had felt like time spent in prison, grimly supervised by the very strict daddy of Xerxes. Nusswan himself

groaned inwardly each time one of them collided with him, but smiled and patted the child on its way. During the course of the evening he produced four bottles of Scotch whisky to general applause. "Now we will put some life in the evening, and into this newly married pair!" said the men to one another, with much nodding and laughter,

and the whispering of things not meant for women's ears. "Okay, brother-in-law," said Nusswan, clinking two empty glasses before Rustom. "You're the expert, better start mixing a dose of Johnnie Walker medicine for everyone." "Sure," said Rustom good-naturedly, and took the glasses. "Just joking, just joking," said Nusswan, holding on to the bottle.

“How can the bridegroom be allowed to work at his own wedding?” It was his only pharmaceutical dig during the evening. An hour after the Scotch was taken, Ruby went to the kitchen; it was time to serve dinner. The dining table had been moved against the wall and set up for a buffet. The caterer’s men staggered in with hot, heavy dishes, calling

“Side please! Side please!” to get through. Everyone reverently made way for the food. The aromas that had been filling the house with appetizing hints all evening, teasing nostrils and taunting palates, suddenly overwhelmed the gathering. A hush fell across the room. Someone chuckled loudly that where Parsis were concerned, food was number one,

conversation came
second. Whereupon
someone else corrected
him: no, no,
conversation came
third, and the second
thing couldn't be
mentioned with ladies
and children.

Munich

Listening to Sunday
Munich and speeding in
Maharashtra. And
speeding with the car
and train racing. All of
this is now covered in
the same story. been
kind, I have been
reasonable. But which
raja's son are you
waiting for? Every chap
I introduce, you turn
your face away from
him and go to the other
side of the room. What
is it that you want?"

“Nothing.” “How can you want nothing? Your whole life will be nothing. Be sensible.” “I know you are doing it for my own good, but I am just not interested.” The answer reminded Nusswan once again of the old Dina, the ungrateful little sister. He suspected that she looked down upon his friends. And they were such good fellows, all of them. Never mind, he

would not let her anger him. “Fine. As I said, I am a reasonable person. If you don’t like these men, no one is forcing you. Find one yourself. Or we can hire a matchmaker. I hear that Mrs. Ginwalla has the best track record for successful kaaj. Let me know what you prefer.”

“I don’t want to get married so soon.”

“Soon? You call this soon? You are twenty-six

years old. What are you hoping for? For Rustom to return miraculously? Be careful, or you'll go crazy like Bapsy Auntie —she at least had an excuse, her husband's body was never found after the dock explosion." A Fine Balance 58 "What a horrible thing to say!" Dina turned away in disgust and left the room. She had been very young when it

happened, but
remembered the day
clearly, during, when
harbour.

Now just cover the
perspectives, everyone
is fucking laughing.

Shirin Aunty
relinquished her hem,
rubbed her hands over
her face, and sat up. By
the time Darab Uncle
returned, having
exchanged his blue-

striped pyjamas for khaki pants and bush shirt, she had the beginnings of a solution for Dina. “Tell me, my child, can you sew?” A Fine Balance 61 “Yes, a little. Ruby taught me how to use a sewing-machine.” “Good. Then there will be work for you. I have an extra Singer you can take. It is quite old, but runs well.” For years, Shirin Aunty had

supplemented her husband's salary from the State Transport Corporation by sewing for a few families. She made simple things like pyjamas, nightgowns, baby blouses, bedsheets, pillow-cases, tablecloths. "You can be my partner," she said. "There is lots of work, more than I can manage now with my weak old eyes. We will start tomorrow." Dina picked

up her handbag and hugged Shirin Aunty and Darab Uncle. They accompanied her to the front door. Then a commotion in the street drew them to the balcony. A huge protest march was surging down the road. “It’s another silly morcha about language,” said Darab Uncle, spotting the banners. “The fools want to divide the state on linguistic lines.”

“Everyone wants to change things,” said Shirin Aunty. “Why can’t people learn to be happy with things as they are? Anyway, let’s go back inside. Dina cannot leave now. All the traffic is stopped.” She sounded quite pleased about it, and enjoyed Dina’s company for two more hours, till the streets had returned to normal. Over the next few days, Dina was

taken around and introduced to the customers. At each stop she waited nervously by Shirin Aunty's side, smiling timidly, trying to grasp the barrage of names and the tailoring instructions. Shirin Aunty kept handing over most of the new jobs to her. At the end of the week, Dina finally protested: "I cannot accept so much, I cannot deprive you of

your income.” “My dear child, you are not depriving me of anything. Darab’s pension is enough for us. I was going to give up the sewing anyway, it was becoming too hard for me. Here, don’t forget this new pattern.” Along with the assignments, Shirin Aunty passed along background material on the customers, information that would

help Dina in her dealings with them.

“The Munshi family is the best—always pays promptly. The Parekhs too, except that they A Fine Balance 62 like to haggle. You just be firm, tell them I have set the rates. Who else? Oh yes, Mr. Savukshaw. He has a big problem with the bottle. By the end of the month his poor missis has hardly any money left. Make sure you take

advance payment.” With the Surtees, the situation was rather unique. Whenever Mr. and Mrs. Surtee fought, she did not cook any dinner. Instead, she pulled out all his pyjamas from the cupboard and set fire to them, saving the ashes and charred wisps in a dinner plate to set before him when he came home from work. “The result,” said Shirin

Aunty, “is more business for you. Every two or three months, after they make up, Mrs. Surtee will give you a large order for pyjamas. But you must pretend it’s normal, or she will get rid of you.” Dina’s collection of domestic portraits continued to grow as Shirin Aunty rendered descriptions of the Davars and Kotwals, the Mehtas and Pavris, the Vatchas and

Seervais, and added them to the portfolio. “You must be getting fed up with all these details,” she said. “Just one last thing, and the most important: never measure the misters for their inseam. Ask for a sample to sew from. And if that is not possible, make sure there is someone present when you measure, a wife or mother or sister.

Otherwise, before you know it, they move thisway-thatway and thrust something in your hand which you don't want. Believe me, I had a nasty experience when I was young and innocent." This last bit of advice was uppermost in Dina's mind when she was taken to meet Fredoon, a bachelor who lived alone. Shirin Auntly warned her not to go

alone to his flat.

“Although he is a perfect gentleman, people’s tongues are mischievous. They will talk that some funny business is going on. Your name will be spoilt.” Dina did not care about people’s tongues and felt no danger from Fredoon, though she was prepared to bolt if he ever asked her to take his inseam. To reassure

Shirin Aunty, she said a friend was always with her. What she did not say was that the friend was Fredoon. For that was what he soon became. His commissions consisted mainly of little frocks and short pants and pinafores; A Fine Balance 63 to help Dina, he presented clothing on birthdays to the children of friends and relatives instead of

envelopes stuffed with rupees. Their friendship grew. Dina often accompanied him to textile stores to help him select material for the gifts. After the shopping, they would stop for tea and cakes at Bastani's. Sometimes Fredoon invited her back to his flat for dinner, picking up fried mutton chops or vindaloo on the way. He was always encouraging

her to try new frock patterns, assert herself forcefully before her clients, demand higher rates. Over the next several months, Dina became more confident about her abilities. The sewing was easy, thanks to her sister-in-law's training. And when there was something tricky, she consulted Shirin Aunty. Her visits brought the two old people such pleasure,

she went regularly,
pretending to be
confused by something
or other: ruched collars,
raglan sleeves,
accordion pleats. The
sewing produced
snippets of fabric every
day, and Shirin Aunty
suggested collecting
them. “Waste nothing—
remember, there is a
purpose for everything.
These scraps can be
very useful.” She
quickly demonstrated

by making a lumpy sanitary pad. “What a good idea,” said Dina. Her budget needed all the help it could get. The textile stuffing was not as absorbent as the pads she used to buy, but the homemade ones could be changed more frequently since they cost nothing. As an added precaution, though, she wore a very dark skirt for the duration. Work made

the hours pass quickly in the little flat. While her eyes and fingers were immersed in the sewing, she acquired a heightened awareness of noises from the flats around her. She collected the sounds, sorted them, replayed them, and created a picture of the lives being lived by her neighbours, the way she transformed measurements into

clothes. Rustom's policy regarding neighbours had been to avoid them as much as possible. A little sahibji-salaam was enough, he said, or it led to gossiping and kaana-sori that got out of hand. But the washing of pots and pans, ringing of doorbells, bargaining with vendors, laundry noises, the flop and slap of clothes thrashed in soapy water, family

quarrels, arguments with servants—all this A Fine Balance 64 seemed like gossip too. And she realized that the noises from her own flat would narrate her life for the neighbours' ears, if they bothered to listen.

There was no such thing as perfect privacy, life was a perpetual concert-hall recital with a captive audience.

Sometimes, the old pastime of attending

free concerts tempted her, but she was reluctant to resume it. Anything which seemed like a clutching at bygone days made her wary. The road towards self-reliance could not lie through the past. By and by, when the tailoring had settled into a comfortable routine for Dina, Shirin Aunty taught her to knit pullovers. "There is not much demand for

woollen things,” she said, “but some people order them for style, or if they are going to hill-stations for a holiday.” As they progressed towards complicated patterns, Shirin Aunty presented her with her entire collection of design books and knitting needles. Lastly, she instructed Dina in embroidery, with a warning: “Needle-work on table napkins and

tea-cloths is very popular, and pays well. But it's a great strain on the eyes. Don't do too much, or it will catch up with you after forty." And so, three years later, when Shirin Aunty passed away, followed by Darab Uncle a few months later, Dina felt confident of managing on her own. She also felt very alone, as though she had lost a second set of parents. A

Fine Balance 65

Contrary to Nusswan's conviction that no one would blame him for Dina's leaving, the relatives quickly grouped into two camps. While a few, professing neutrality, felt comfortable on both sides of the line, at least half were staunchly in support of Dina. To show their approval of her independent spirit, they came out with

numerous ideas for money-making ventures.

“Butter biscuits. That’s where all the cash is.”

“Why don’t you start a crèche? Any mother would prefer you to look after her children, instead of an ayah.”

“Make a good rose sherbet and you won’t have to look back.

People will buy it by the gallon.” Dina listened with gratitude to everything, inclining her

head interestedly as they formulated their schemes. She became an expert at non-committal nodding. When the tailoring was slow, she filled their orders for cakes, bhakras, vasanu, and coomas. Then her friend Zenobia had a brainwave about in-home haircuts for children. Zenobia had fulfilled her schoolgirl ambition: she was now

chief hairstylist at the Venus Beauty Salon. After the shop closed at night, she instructed Dina on a wig glued to a plaster-of-Paris cranium. The comb kept getting caught in the cheap mop's knotted strands. "Don't worry," she reassured Dina. "It's much easier with real hair." From the surplus in the shop she put together a kit of scissors, hair clippers,

brush, comb, talcum powder and powder puff. Then they made a list of friends and relatives with children who could be used as guinea pigs. Xerxes and Zarir's names were left out; though Nusswan would have welcomed the opportunity to save on haircuts, Dina felt uncomfortable now in his house. "Just go after the brats, one by one, till you have cropped

the whole jing-bang lot,” said Zenobia. “It’s only a question of practice.” She monitored the results, and soon declared Dina trained and ready. Now Dina began going door to door. After a few days, however, the enterprise folded without a single haircut. Neither she nor Zenobia had remembered that most people regarded hair clippings within their

dwellings as extreme bad luck. Dina related the misadventures to her friend, how the thought of hair hitting the floor made the prospective clients hit A Fine Balance 66 the ceiling. “Madam, you have no consideration? What have we done to you that you want to bring misfortune within our four walls?” Some people did offer her their children’s heads.

“But only if you do it outside,” they said. Dina refused. There were limits to what she would do. She was an in-home children’s stylist, not an open-air pavement barber. Afterwards, she did not hang up her clippers for good. Her friends’ children continued to benefit from her skills. Some of the little boys and girls, remembering the practice haircuts, hid

when Dina Aunty arrived. As she got better, they were less afraid. Through all this, there were lean times when it was difficult to meet the rent or pay the electricity bill. Shirin Aunty and Darab Uncle, while they were still alive, had often tided her over with a loan of forty or fifty rupees. Now the only alternative was Nusswan. “Of course,

it's my duty," he said piously. "Are you sure sixty will be enough?" "Yes, thank you. I will pay it back next month." "No rush. So tell me, have you found a sweetheart?" "No," she replied, wondering if he suspected something about Fredoon. Could someone have seen them together and reported back to Nusswan? During the two years since Shirin

Aunty's death, the bachelor had progressed from friend to lover. Though the idea of marriage was still difficult for Dina to entertain, she enjoyed Fredoon's company because he was perfectly content to spend time in her presence without feeling compelled to make clever conversation or to participate in the usual

social activities of couples. The two were equally happy sitting in his flat or walking in a public garden. But when they ventured into the private garden of intimacy, it was a troubled relationship. There were certain things she could not bring herself to do.

Rehearsal on Speed

Perspectives all now coinciding. Case won, kicked ass - read thematics.

The bed—any bed—was out of bounds, sacred and reserved for married couples only. So they used a chair. Then one day, as she swung a leg over to straddle Fredoon, her action

suddenly resurrected the image of Rustom flinging his leg A Fine Balance 67 over his bicycle. Now the chair, like the bed, was no longer possible. “Oh God!” said Fredoon, groaning softly. He put on his trousers and made tea. A few days later he persuaded her into the standing position, and Dina had no objections. He began to refine the procedure

as much as he could,
finding a low platform
for her to stand on;
their heights became
more compatible during
their embraces. Next he
bought a stool, took
some personal
measurements, and
sawed off precisely two
and a quarter inches,
adjusting it to the
proper size for her to
rest one leg. Sometimes
she raised the left,
sometimes the right. He

arranged these accessories against the wall and suspended pillows from the ceiling at appropriate heights for her head and back, and under the hips. “Is it comfortable?” he asked tenderly, and she nodded. But the ultimate satisfaction of the bed could only be approximated. What should have been the occasional spice to vary the regular menu had

become the main course, leaving the appetite often confused or unfulfilled. The opposite wall of Fredoon's room had a small window in it. Outside the window was a streetlamp. Once, between dusk and nightfall, as they were locked in their vertical lovemaking, it started to rain. A moist garden smell came in through the window. Through

her half-open eyes Dina saw the drizzle float like mist around the lamplight. Occasionally, a hand or elbow or shoulder strayed beyond the pillows, onto the bare wall, and the cement felt deliciously cool against their heated flesh. “Mmm,” she said, enjoying with all her senses, and he was pleased. The rain was heavier now. She could see it slanting in

needles past the streetlamp. She watched it for a while, then stiffened. "Please stop," she whispered, but he continued moving. "Stop, I said! Please, Fredoon, stop it!" "Why?" he begged. "Why? Now what's wrong?" She shivered. "The rain..." "The rain? I'll shut the window if you like." A Fine Balance 68 She shook her head. "I'm sorry,

something made me think of Rustom.” He took her face between his hands, but she pushed them away. She swam out of his embrace and into the memory of that night from long ago: she was wearing Rustom’s warm raincoat; her umbrella had broken in the storm. And after the concert, at the bus shelter, they had held hands for the first time

ever, their palms moist
with the finely falling
drizzle. Remembering
the purity of that
moment, Dina
contrasted it with the
present.

Maratisa

A long jive, twist and
Greek Bible dance.

“I told you he speaks
only when he

disagrees.” “But why worry about money,” she said. “Work hard and you will earn lots of it.” “Not the way you pay us,” muttered Omprakash under his breath. “What’s that?” “Nothing, nothing,” said Mara hastily. “He was talking to me. He has a headache.” She asked if he would like to take an Aspro for the pain. Lenara refused, but from then on, his voice

was heard increasingly. “Do you have to go far to get the work?” he asked. “Not far,” said Dianala. “Takes about one hour.” She was pleased that he was settling in, making an effort to be agreeable. A Fine Balance 86 “If you need help to carry the dresses there, let us know.” How nice of him, she thought. “And what is the name of the company you go to?”

Glad about his grumpy silences having ended, she almost blurted out the name, then pretended not to have heard. He repeated the question. "Why bother with the name," she said. "All that I am concerned with is the work." "Very true," agreed Mara. "That's what interests us also." His nephew scowled. After a while he tried again: Was there only

one company or several different ones? Was she paid a commission, or a set price for the complete order? Ishvar was embarrassed. “Less talk, Omprakash, and more sewing.” Now Dinala longed for the silent nephew. She saw what he was after, and from that day made sure the material from Au Revoir Exports bore no signs of its origin. Labels and tags were

torn off the packages if the telltale name was featured. Invoices were kept locked away in the cupboard. Cracks began appearing in her optimism as it tried to keep up with the tailors. She knew the road had turned bumpy. THE DARJIS lived far, at the mercy of the railways. Still, Dina worried now if they were late, certain she had been deserted for better-paying jobs.

And since she could not afford to let them suspect her fears, she always masked her relief upon their arrival with a show of displeasure. A day before the due date, they did not come till ten o'clock. "There was an accident, train was delayed," explained Mara. "Some poor fellow dead on the tracks again." "It's happening too often,"

said Liya. The empty-stomach smell floating out their mouths, like a cocoon containing words, was unpleasant. She was not interested in their excuses. The sooner they were at their sewing-machines the better.